

# Predators *in Alabama?*

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# What's the first thing you think of when you hear a "piranha" has just been caught at your local fishing or swimming hole? Do thoughts of ravenous fish eating everything in sight enter your head? Do you wonder if you can ever go into the water again?

These concerns have been expressed in recent years due to the alleged catch of "piranha" in the public waters of Alabama. Several articles in local newspapers have been quick to report the catch of a piranha in their area. However, to date, there has been no confirmed catches of piranha in Alabama public waters. So what was caught? All catches brought to the attention of fisheries biologists with the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division have been verified as pacu.

## What Is Pacu?

Pacu (*Colossoma* spp. or *Piaractus* spp.) refers to several species of fishes native to South America that are closely related to piranha. Pacu are mainly herbivores consuming plant matter, seeds, nuts, and fruit; however, they will eat small fish and insects. This explains why anglers catch pacu in Alabama with minnows, live and plastic baits. While taxonomists debate on the number of piranha species (also native to South America), the true piranhas (*Pristigaster* spp., *Pygocentrus* spp., *Pygopristis* spp., and *Serrasalmus* spp.) are considered carnivores consuming fish and animal flesh.

## Telling the Difference

How do you tell the difference between a piranha and a pacu? Piranha and pacu have similar coloration and body shapes, hence the confusion. The simplest way is by looking at the teeth.

Yes, you must look at the teeth! Using a pen, slowly pry open the jaw. Be careful not to touch the teeth until you are certain it is a pacu. True piranhas have a single row of very sharp triangular-shaped teeth in the lower and

upper jaws with a pronounced underbite. These teeth are obviously best suited for shearing and tearing flesh. Pacu have molar-like or somewhat square-shaped straight teeth in a less underbite to a slight overbite. This type of dentation is used for crushing plant matter and seeds.

## Illegal Release

How does a pacu find its way into Alabama's public waters? These fish are released by aquarists because their pet has outgrown its tank. When first sold, these species are usually 2-3 inches; however, they can quickly grow to 30 inches. The most common pacu species sold in pet stores are the red-bellied and black pacus. Both of these species have been found in Alabama public waters. Instead of properly disposing or searching for a larger aquarium, some aquarists decide to release their overgrown pacu into the local public lake or river. This is illegal due to the harm that non-native aquatic species can cause to native aquatic species. The release or stocking without an approved permit from the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources of any fish, mussel, snail or crayfish into the public waters of Alabama is illegal. Non-native aquatic species can outcompete the native aquatic species for food and habitat and may introduce exotic parasites and diseases.

Piranha (bottom photo) with sharp, triangular-shaped teeth and pacu (top photo) with straight, molar-like teeth.



PACU




PIRANHA

What do you do with your overgrown or unwanted aquarium fishes? The following are alternatives to release as responsible environmental stewards:

- Contact your pet retailer for possible return or exchange.
- Give or trade with other aquarist.
- Donate to local aquarium society, zoo, or school.
- Contact veterinarian or pet retailer for guidance on humane disposal.
- If you cannot find a home for your fishes, bury them. Dump the water into the toilet or yard, far away from storm drains.

## Species Regulation

Why have no piranha been caught like pacu in Alabama? This can be explained by the prohibited species regulation and enforcement of this regulation by conservation officers with the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. For any piranha it is illegal to "possess, sell, offer for sale, import, bring or cause to be brought or imported into the state of Alabama." Moreover, through the diligent efforts of our conservation officers, they have been able to confiscate and make successful cases for the possessing and importing of piranha in Alabama.

These efforts have helped to prevent any unintentional or intentional release of piranha in Alabama's public waters. However, we cannot solely rely on conservation officers to protect Alabama's aquatic resources. All citizens must consider their actions and their affect on the unique aquatic resources of Alabama. 

## For More Information

[www.habitattitude.net](http://www.habitattitude.net)

[www.protectyourwaters.net](http://www.protectyourwaters.net)

[www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/aquatics](http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/aquatics)